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Pages from the past

REMINISCENCES OF PARISIAN HOSPITALS

H Burden: Presidential Address to the Ulster Medical Society 1888. From the Transactions of the Ulster Medical Society, Session 1888–89; pp 50-59.

GENTLEMEN, — Few persons, I imagine, are disposed to deny that obvious and great advantages may be derived from a visit to one or more of the chief centres of civilisation in Europe. To become an eye-witness to the profound influence exercised over social and political life by modes of thought and action widely different from those to which we have become habituated is mental discipline of the highest order. Such experience tends to tone down rudeness, prejudice, and uncharitableness, the offspring of a too-restricted intercourse with our fellow-mortals; but, above all things, it impresses upon us with a force and vividness, otherwise unobtainable, that greatest discovery of modern civilisation — namely, the equality of all men. Nevertheless, while I am willing to admit all this, and much more, in favour of foreign travel, I candidly confess that, in my opinion, the professional culture resulting from attendance upon continental cliniques has been, and is, greatly over-rated. On the present occasion I shall not attempt to discuss the question, but shall merely point out that in the majority of cases imperfect knowledge of the language causes much waste of valuable time, together with erroneous interpretation of statements made by the clinical teacher, and that peculiarities in the organisation of foreigners, though real, affect the manner in which we treat our patients so immaterially that they may, without sensible error, be safely discounted by a British practitioner. A Frenchman or a French-woman — and I advisedly add woman, for a reason to which I shall hereafter refer — is, for all practical purposes, constituted on the same plan, is subject to the same accidents, suffers from the same diseases, and is amenable to the same treatment as one of our own countrymen. I do not ignore that fact, so properly and wisely stated by Professor Cuming in his Presidential Address to the British Medical Association, that differences exist in the proclivity of diverse races of mankind for certain specific diseases and morbid processes. My contention simply is that a continental course of medical study should be regarded as a luxury, not a necessity — a luxury which, nevertheless, I would cordially recommend to every one who can command the necessary time and money.

Such being my views, you will not be surprised to learn that though I have twice resided in the French Capital, during many weeks each time, yet my primary object in going there was not precisely to avail myself of the manifold facilities it offered for increasing professional knowledge. My first experience of the inner life in Parisian hospitals occurred during my honeymoon trip. On that occasion my wife and myself dwelt in the city for a period of about six weeks. Each morning, with few exceptions, I spent several hours in one or other of the great hospitals.

My second visit to Paris took place about eight years later, in the course of an extensive tour through France. During our three weeks' stay in Paris I renewed my acquaintanceship with hospital physicians and cliniques. The Hôtel Dieu, the Children's Hospital, the Hôpital Lariboisière, the Salpêtrière, claimed the larger share of my attention, but my favourite resort was the Hôtel Dieu. . . . .

. . . . In the Hôtel Dieu it was my good fortune to witness a feat in the art of percussion, which I had never previously, nor indeed have ever since, seen

equalled. A patient, suffering from kidney disease, was under examination by the physician in attendance. The name of the latter I am unable to recall to mind. Tall, spare, erect, his features were pale, sharply cut, and as impassive as though carved in marble; his eyes brilliant and piercing as a hawk's. A black frock coat, closely buttoned up to his throat, contributed to impart a thoroughly military air to his figure. He turned the patient over on his face and proceeded to percuss the region of the kidney. Then he called for pen and ink and drew, in outline on the skin of the man's loin, the form of the underlying organ. When completed, the figure represented a kidney of normal shape, but measuring about half an inch to an inch more than the healthy viscus in every diameter. A murmur of applause burst forth from the train of students in attendance, and the physician passed on in triumph to the next bed.

In the Children's Hospital Trousseau was now at the height of his glory. Here he continued to test to the utmost the efficacy of his special modes of treating croup, notable among which was his frequent recourse to section of the windpipe. Some years before my visits to the hospital he had reported the results of the operation in 215 cases, of which 47 recovered and 168 died. He concluded that there was little danger from tracheotomy, as he had performed the operation 121 times with only one mischance, so far as the operation was concerned.

If I went occasionally to the Salpêtrière it was not because of any extraordinary advantages it supplied for obtaining professional instruction. Charcot had not yet appeared upon the scene. Neuro-pathology in general, locomotor ataxy, scleroses of the nervous centres, and myo-trophic lesions in particular, were still involved in a cloud of misinterpretation and obscurity. What drew me to that ancient hospice was the historical associations connected with it and the weird old-world aspect it presented. Having recently quitted the fresh and handsome boulevards, peopled by a gay, frivolous, over-dressed, gesticulating, chattering throng, the latest development of an age too prone to drown all thought of yesterday and to-morrow in the enjoyment of to-day, on entering within the portals of the Saltpetre House one found oneself suddenly face to face with the surroundings of a period nearly three centuries old. Roughly paved, uneven courtyards and quadrangles, and buildings, whose grey, weather-beaten, time-worn walls proclaimed the antiquity of their origin, everywhere met the eye. The inmates themselves presented an appearance in consonance with their environment. For the most part aged and imbecile, they wore the aspect of a race who had survived the conditions of a long forgotten past. The dreamy quietude of the place subdued the mind to meditation on byegone events suggested by the scene. The nature of saltpetre, the invention of gunpowder, Louis XIII, the French Revolution, and the tragic fate of the illustrious chemist, Lavoisier, who once laboured here, were subjects that almost inevitably thrust themselves into the mental retrospect. How this slumbering abode of mental aberration has been roused from its lethargy! How Charcot has established in it a laboratory of research and a clinique of world-wide fame and resort! How it has, through his indomitable energy and zeal, been made to yield material for the elucidation of neurological problems that had baffled the efforts of all previous inquirers!

Before concluding, I must fulfil my promise to explain why, in my assertion that Frenchmen exhibit the same organic structure as Englishmen, I considered it necessary to make special reference to women. I did so for the following reason:– When Demonstrator in Queen's College, I was on one occasion asked by the Professor of Anatomy and Physiology to read and estimate the value of the

answers he had received from students to questions set by him. "Describe the collar bone?" was the substance of one query. When I came to the papers of a certain candidate, his answer proved extremely interesting. The young gentleman's style was graceful and flowing, yet somewhat light and discursive. The anatomy of the clavicle, to judge from the tenor of the earlier part of his communication, appeared to be a distasteful subject, since he merely used that bone as a peg upon which to hang some favourite theories and doctrines of his own, which had the slightest possible connection with it. It turned out, however, that he had been reserving his strength until he had arrived at the peroration, for on reaching the last line I read the astounding statement that Frenchwomen have longer clavicles than Englishwomen. The apparent magnitude of the discovery was artfully enhanced by the bald and simple language in which it was announced. The fact, if fact it were, being new to me, I was placed in a position of some difficulty. It it were true, to how many marks was the candidate entitled for his answer? But with the discussion of this knotty problem I shall not trouble you. On inquiry I found that our philosopher had enjoyed the advantage of an entire session's medical study in Paris. The knowledge revealed in his answer was, I have no doubt, a mere bagatelle compared with the stores of information of a like nature he had acquired during his residence in the French Capital. Whether he arrived at his discovery by the comparison of a series of careful measurements made in the Osteological Museums of Paris with others obtained in Great Britain, or in a less laborious but much more agreeable manner, I know not. While I am prepared to admit to the fullest extent the value of his discovery, should it be confirmed by other *savants,* I am, nevertheless, equally ready to make him or anyone else a present of it.

I would still hold to my belief that a Frenchwoman is constituted on essentially the same plan as an Englishwoman.